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AUTHOR LeFauve, Linda M.
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ABSTRACT

The college choice process has taken on new levels of complexity as the Web has grown in both importance and pervasiveness. Admissions offices struggle to balance their resource investment in the Web and traditional publications. Using both qualitative and quantitative analyses, researchers examined the "persuasion" and "information" dimensions of these two ways to reach prospective students. Through focus groups and individual interviews, students expressed their opinions of Web and traditional publications, contrasting Web sites with "viewbooks." Students were also asked to "build" a Web site or viewbook. Findings support the hypothesis that prospective students perceive a college's materials differently depending on the vehicle used to present them, and that, in fact, they look to different methods of presentation for specific kinds of material. Web pages are more likely to be a source of information consulted early in the decision-making process to narrow the field or late in the process after a decision has been made. Web sites are used by students to find answers to questions they have already formulated. Viewbooks are more likely to be a vehicle of persuasion and the sources that narrows a prospective student's choices. Viewbooks are also absorbed by students in ways that lead to affective change. Viewbooks seem to work best as an individual experience. (SLD)

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The Place of the Web in College Choice:

Information or Persuasion?

Linda M. LeFauve

Davidson College

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Abstract

The college choice process has taken on new levels of complexity as the web has grown in both importance and pervasiveness. Admissions offices struggle to balance their resource investment in the web and traditional publications while prospective students must find ways to cut through the mass of information available to them. Further, more perceptual modes of decision-making do not necessarily advance with the same rapidity as technical developments might afford. The ease with which information is made available is moving faster than changes in the way decisions are made.

Using both qualitative and quantitative analysis, the "persuasion" and "information" dimensions of these two presentations was examined. It was determined that the web and traditional publications do, in fact, function in very different ways for student audiences.

The Place of the Web in College Choice:

Information or Persuasion?

The college choice process—already fascinating in its overlap of fact and perception, logic and fancy—has taken on new levels of complexity as the world wide web has grown in importance and pervasiveness. Admissions offices struggle to balance their resource investment in the web and traditional publications while prospective students must find ways to cut through the mass of information available to them. Additionally, both admissions offices and prospective students find themselves in the position of solicitor of, as well as respondent to, requests for information.

What complicates the effect of the web—in addition to its ubiquitous nature—is that it is a relative innovation in the college choice process. This is not to say that it is new; on the technological front, even a year can be a lifetime. But those more perceptual modes of decision-making do not necessarily advance with the same rapidity as technical developments might afford. The ease with which information is made available is moving faster than changes in the way decisions are made.

According to the advertising industry, print is a "response" medium. That is, messages conveyed in print, once processed, are either incorporated into, or collide with, existing assumptions. There is also research available on the effect of other media, but surprisingly little on the way individuals respond to more interactive means of conveying information. The web offers the user unprecedented control over how to peruse the information offered, and offers colleges unprecedented insight into how their audiences think about what it is they want those audiences to know.

There is a linearity in traditional admissions publications, for example, that affords their producers a level of control the web does not. The structure of these publications may differ somewhat from institution to institution, but certain "rules" are generally honored: The most important information appears at the beginning, photographs appear near corresponding text, and so on. On the web, however,

hyperlinks enable visitors to the site to determine their own course in a frequently non-linear fashion, and search capabilities enable users to determine for themselves what information they wish to obtain. The result may be that a carefully crafted section on the generous financial aid available may never be seen by someone who has gone first to the section on costs, determined that a particular institution is not affordable, and moved on to another site.

Research on persuasive message strategies exists, using a constructivist methodology focusing on social-cognitive structures of the subjects and the features of the messages themselves (for example, person-centered, listener-adaptive). This research, however, has concentrated on interactive social situations and the adjustments made by speakers during the course of the interaction. There is little research on cognitive differentiation among "static" messages or interactive messages completely under the control of the target recipient, nor on the ways in which individuals in these situations differentiate among competing constructs.

Once upon a more naïve time, admissions offices tended to format publications to highlight what they thought was important without hard evidence about what mattered—and in what order—to their prospective audiences. They saw the purpose of the publications as provision of information: Here's where we are, here's what we offer, here's what we cost. The process has since become more sophisticated and the best publications take advantage of their full potential as vehicles of persuasion. They market the institution, enabling prospective students to grasp the personality of a campus, and targeting that message at the prospective students most likely to benefit from that particular blend of academics, extracurricular activities, and expectations.

Where is the admissions office web site on this evolutionary path? Where should it be? Is it reasonable to surmise that when a prospective student visits a site that he or she is subject to the same principles of persuasion at which designers of traditional publications have become expert? Or does the web function in qualitatively different ways?

The research project discussed below is an attempt to answer those questions. Using both qualitative methods and quantitative analysis, this first stage of a multi-stage project focuses on prospective students beginning their college search. The ultimate goal of the project is to develop a scale for measuring the persuasion rating of various components of both viewbook and web site content. A future stage will assess whether these findings generalize across different categories of institutions and types of students.

Method

As the research is exploratory a variety of overlapping methods were employed; two ancillary objectives of the project were the development of a protocol for future research and a lexicon adequate to discuss the findings. Therefore, techniques that allowed participating individuals maximum opportunity to articulate reactions and opinions in their own words received the highest priority and techniques that imposed varying degrees of structure were assessed carefully for confounds.

The protocols for analysis were primarily linguistic in nature. Measurements included the use of passive versus active constructions, verbal patterns indicating the stage of cognitive tuning achieved, relevance of response to question, use of buffer phrases or jargon, and level of "parroting." The means of inducing conversation and/or response included:

Direct questions. Both in groups and in individual interviews students were asked variations of a question about why they used a web site, including,

- "Why do you use a college's web site?
- "Why did you use a college's web site?"
- "Why do/did you go to a college's web site?"

For each group or individual interview the wording option was selected randomly.

Lexicon creation. Focus group participants were given 3x5 index cards and asked to write down, without discussion among themselves:

- Adjectives describing "effective web sites" and "effective view books"
- Verbs related to "effective web sites" and "effective view books"
- Same tasks (different groups) but "effective" in the request replaced by "good"

All the cards were collected and randomly placed on a table, and the participants were asked to assign them to the same categories, i.e., adjectives/verbs describing effective/good web sites and view books. They were asked to make the assignments as a group, to discuss the reasoning they were using as they progressed, and to reach consensus on the assignments they were making. The order in which they received directions varied from group to group (e.g., one group make have been asked to describe view books first and web sites second, another group to describe web sites first and view books second.)

Build a Web Site/ Make a View Book. Focus group participants (distinct from previous focus groups) were asked to "build" a web site or viewbook. Various sections of text, photographs, items for tables of content and/or navigation buttons were provided and they were asked, as had been the case for the groups participating in the lexicon exercise, to work as a group, to discuss their choices aloud, and to reach consensus.[1]

Group navigation. A computer training room with an overhead display unit was used. Working as a group, students "roamed" several college web sites pre-selected by the investigator. Beyond directing the group to a particular site, the group was given no direction; participants were, however, asked to discuss their navigation decisions and reactions to content aloud. As the display on the computer used by the students was visible on the large screen as well, it was possible to follow along as the group navigated through the sites.

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[1] The reason for directing groups to reach consensus on these tasks was 1) to create an incentive to articulate the thoughts behind the choices being made and 2) to assess the priority individuals assigned to various reasons for those choices (e.g., which arguments appeared more frequently or were repeated during a single session?)

Recall. Individual participants were presented with tables of contents from view books and/or asked to view specified college home pages with navigation buttons comparable to the major headings in the view books. (Some participants were presented with both tasks and others with only one task or the other.) Participants were given one minute to read the table of content or home page and tested for recall of the major headings or navigation buttons 15 minutes later. What was recalled, and in what order, was noted. Special attention was paid to words or concepts that participants believed were part of the materials they had viewed, as these "errors" provide important clues as to the associative properties of the actual components of the material.

Projection. Participants, both individually and in groups, were directed to photographs in view books or on web sites (information identifying the institutions was masked) and asked to do one or more of the following:

- Assign dialogue to the people depicted in the photo(s)
- Provide captions for the photos
- Describe the institution that might be portrayed

Analysis

Several techniques frequently over-lapped during the analyses. The approach common to all was a search for patterns—linguistic or conceptual—within individual participants and among the groups. The analyses were organized into three general categories.

Content. The content of participants' conversations and responses were evaluated for the presence of patterns and/or organizing principles.

Linguistics. How ideas were expressed was assessed independently of the actual content. Absence or presence of the following were especially useful:

- Use of jargon not assumed to be a normal part of students' vocabulary
- Parroting of information contained in view books or on web pages

- Use of buffer phrases or passive constructions that signaled less certainty or commitment to the idea being expressed
- Indicators of the level of cognitive tuning achieved (that is, were participants in "reception" or "transmission" mode with regard to the ideas being expressed)
- Sentence formation as questions or conclusions

Association. The order in which text, graphics, or concepts were manipulated or recalled provided some clues as to the links participants made within and across the materials and, most importantly, provided insights into the organizing principle(s) under which they were operating. It was especially revealing when participants "remembered" information not included in any of the materials presented or viewed, or asked, without prompting, if a word/phrase/concept could be added.

Information/persuasion ratings. During the research phase, all sessions were either tape- or video-recorded; conversation and responses were then transcribed. Working independently, raters (including students and staff) who had not been part of the sessions were given lists of verbs and adjectives culled from the transcripts and asked to classify the words or phrases as related to "information" or "persuasion." Words and phrases with inter-rater reliability of less than 80% were discarded.

Findings

Many of the words or phrases designated "information" or "informative" were related to specific question forms (for example, "when," "where," and "how many") or implied questions (for example, "to find," "to see," and "to see if"). Many of the words designated "persuasion" or "persuasive" indicated conclusions (for example, "I know" and "good," "fun," or "disappointing") or questions that would lead to a statement of opinion rather than fact (for example, "I wonder…").

The assignment of these words or phrases was consistent with conversational levels. As a conversation develops, participants tend to move from small talk to the expression of core values, and linguistic patterns follow this movement.

- Small talk. Concrete, demographic, current
- Social. Roles, impressions
- Self-defense. Rationalization, diversion
- Authentic. Congruence between content and form of expression
- Core. Articulation of values, personal conviction

While "small talk" is relatively easy to recognize, authentic conversation can be difficult to separate from the social of self-defense modes of conversation. One clue that the authentic stage has been achieved is that participants move from "it" as the preferred pronoun to "I."[2] Words or phrases designated "persuasive" tended to follow this same pattern, consistent with either 1) an susceptibility to a message or 2) the successful internalization of a message.

The dichotomy was evident in the exercises in which the students had participated. As the examples below indicate, the words and phrases used in the tasks involving web pages were more often classified as "informative" while the words and phrases used in the tasks involving the view books were more often classified as "persuasive."

Web pages/Informative	*View books/Persuasive*
why	seems
when	I know
to find	I wonder
to see	useful
to see if	I am
is	good

[2] One very clear example of this phenomenon can be found in research done for Porsche. When participants in this research were initially asked why they bought a Porsche they initially made statements such as "it's reliable." As the interviews or focus groups continued, and the participants were more comfortable, they were more likely to made statements such as "I deserve to have some fun."

how many	I need
investigate	interesting
difficult	I would
it is	it would
they are	fun
locate	I will
determine	disappointing
search	I think

In addition to searching for patterns in the language used by participants, paralinguistic analysis provided confirmation of the differing ways in which participants perceived the communication vehicles. Among the results of this analysis were the following.

Verbalizations congruent with behavior. When discussing view books, focus group participants tended to agree or disagree with each others' statements with a level of enthusiasm consistent with the content of their responses, indicating a recognition of the sentiments articulated by others. Participants were able to tap into a common affect. When discussing web sites, the same statement construction might generate cursory agreement without an attendant affective investment on the part of the other group participants. For example, the following exchange was in response to a page in a view book:

Participant 1: It feels, I don't know, close knit. Like people matter.

Participant 2: (sitting up straighter and leaning toward the first speaker) Exactly! Not just a "you're a number" place.

A similar statement made in response to a web page required a prompt from the facilitator to elicit a reaction, as an apparent fact required no response from the rest of the group.

Participant 1: It says the faculty take an interest in students. (No response from the group.)

Facilitator: Anyone else?

Participant 2: Yeah, I saw that, too.

Buffer phrases. Buffer phrases (for example, "I think perhaps..." or "well, maybe...") were used more frequently when participants were discussing view books, revealing in many cases a reluctance to express a contrary view. For example,

Participant 1: This seems to be a very friendly place where I would feel open and not insecure, not pressured.

Participant 2: Well, I think it might be a different kind of pressure, you know, because it's small and everyone knows each other. Do you know what I mean?

One reading of this observation might be that the second speaker genuinely believed what he or she was saying at the same time he or she recognized the legitimacy of the view held by the first speaker. Note also the use of the phrases "this seems," "I would," and "I think," consistent with a classification of this exchange as related to a persuasive, rather than informative, communication vehicle.

When discussing web pages, however, the conversation was more direct, an indication that participants believed they were viewing a presentation of facts and were therefore ready to correct others in the group. Contrary statements, rather than being perceived as another opinion, were perceived as a misinterpretation of those facts.

Participant 1: It's a small college.

Participant 2: No, 4000 students isn't small.

Example versus concept/Jargon. Conceptualization requires a deeper level of processing than definition by illustration or example and was found more often in exercises involving view books than web pages. In a similar vein, participants were more likely to "parrot" statements made on web pages than in view books, using jargon-laden language if they were directed to more affective sections of a web page. In those cases, even the affective language of a web page was perceived as an attempt at "fact," although frequently unsuccessful as the participants had not processed these statements conceptually, thereby

enabling them to articulate the sentiment in their own language. Nearly identical presentation in a view book, however, more often led to a participant reworking the idea presented into language consistent with the rest of their conversational style. For example, a web page included the phrase "provides a quality education" and that phrase made an appearance later in the group discussions in exactly that form. References to "quality education" in a view book—although not immune to being echoed in that form—also appeared in several variations, including "would give me a chance to really learn," "an education that is worth something."

Several of the exercises provided insights into the organizing principles used by students. These were not principles necessarily articulated by the participants but organizational patterns that emerged as the exercises progressed.

In some cases, what was not done was as important in determining this organization as what was done. When discussing elements to be included in a web site, for example, participants more often considered but then discarded elements ultimately excluded than they did when discussing view book construction. In those cases, exclusion by omission (that is, the elements were never under consideration) occurred more often. Similarly, participants occasionally responded not to the question asked by the facilitator but to their own version of the question, a indication that their preconceived perceptions made some questions simply more relevant than others. A good example of this latter phenomenon occurred when a group was asked why they would go to a college's web site. Many of the responses began with *when* they would visit it, the *why* only implicit: "When I'm still exploring colleges" or "when I have a question" (as opposed to "to learn more about a college" or "to answer a question." View books, however, elicited more *why* responses: "To get a feel for that campus" or "because it looked interesting." Variations on the question itself (replacing "go to" a web site with "use a web site," for example) made no discernible difference.

Response time, both for questions asked of individuals and groups, and for discussion within the group, yielded some interesting information as well. Participants were able to respond to a question about "what makes a good (or useful) web site?" quickly, citing organization, ease of navigation, search capacities, speed, and current information. When asked the same question about view books in the general sense, long pauses more often preceded responses that were frequently self-referential: "Interests me," for example, or "makes me want to pick it up and read it."

When describing a *particular* viewbook, however—one physically present—responses were less labored, although still self-referential, and, most importantly, reactive: "Makes me feel like I'm there," "nice campus" or "these are people like me." This finding is consistent with the assumption that print is, indeed, a response medium. responsive. When describing a *particular* web site, responses were nearly identical to the responses to the hypothetical, general case web site.

The most compelling evidence appeared when identical text was presented via a web page or within a view book. Interpretation of the material varied according to the vehicle used to present it. For example, participants were shown a page that contained the following information:

The college enrolls 3000 undergraduates.

When asked what was on that page, students who had seen it on a web page "reported," that is, responded with some variation of "it tells you how many students go there." Students who had seen the same text on a view book page, however, more often "interpreted," providing some variation of "it's small and personal."

Other dichotomies related to thought process, including systematic (web) versus heuristic (view book) cognition, and rational (web) versus emotional (view book).

Summary

The findings lend support to the hypothesis that prospective students perceive a college's materials differently depending on the vehicle used to present them and that, in fact, they look to different methods of presentation for specific kinds of material. Web pages are more likely to be:

- A source of information
- Consulted early in the decision-making process to narrow the field or late in the process after a decision has been made
- Navigated by students in ways that lead them to answers to specific questions they have already formed

In contrast, view books are more likely to be:

- A vehicle of persuasion
- The format that narrows the field of probable institutions on a prospective student's "radar screen" down to a final few
- Absorbed by students in ways that lead to affective change

These differences are further highlighted by the finding that there seems to be a ready vocabulary for students to discuss web sites, whether they are talking about when or how they use them, how they react to material in them, or what that material means. It is also a shared vocabulary, allowing them to work together as a group on navigation tasks and to carry on discussions that include common experiences.

View books, on the other hand, seem to work best as an individual experience. The nature of a viewbook is such that its reader has less control over what material is presented, resulting in the use of a more "receptive" vocabulary; this is in marked contrast to the "determining vocabulary" (one that indicates what to do) heard and seen with respect to the web sites.

The Next Stage

The research so far suggests that a differential approach to materials presented in traditional view books and college web sites may be in the best interests of some colleges. The "some colleges" stipulation is an important one, as this project has focussed on high achieving students interested in liberal arts colleges. Comparing the results presented here with similar research on other groups of students and other types of colleges is the next logical—and necessary—stage.

Finally, it is important to note that this research has not differentiated between "good" and "bad" web sites or view books. No part of the research protocol was intended to judge the quality of the materials or the extent to which they functioned as students expected. However, the exploratory and over-lapping nature of the project can provide some directions for evaluating the effectiveness of these materials as an understanding of their use increases.